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# Healing Power of the Mind

Winston J. Craig

*Andrews University*, [wcraig@andrews.edu](mailto:wcraig@andrews.edu)

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Anticipation can  
shape your body's  
response.

## Healing Power of the Mind

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

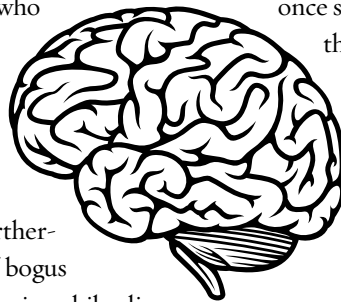
Expectations really  
do matter.

Placebos can have a powerful impact upon healing. It is estimated that 30–40 percent of subjects have a beneficial response to placebos (inert controls). Patients who experience pain, headaches or depression, or who have irritable bowel syndrome or allergic skin reactions, have been treated with starch pills, vitamin capsules or other placebos, and end up feeling better and experiencing fewer symptoms. Patients with Parkinson's disease produce more dopamine and have better motor function after they are given a saline injection that they are told will relieve their symptoms.

Anticipation can shape one's response. When a British research group tested a chemotherapy drug for stomach cancer, they found that one-third of recipients receiving an inert pill lost their hair, and one-fifth developed nausea and vomiting. In addition, surgeons at Baylor College of Medicine in Texas gave 180 patients with osteoarthritic knees either arthroscopic surgery or just a simple incision. Two years later, those receiving sham surgery (also called placebo surgery) felt as much or more pain relief than those who had their knee joint cleaned. Both groups reported similar improvement in joint function.

Researchers found they could open the airways of asthmatics by telling them they were inhaling a bronchodilator. Furthermore, it has been shown that injections of bogus painkillers can activate endorphins in the brain, while clinically depressed patients taking a placebo experienced brain activity in the same part of brain as those taking antidepressants. What does all this mean?

Signals from the brain can control bodily functions and profoundly influence our physiology. Sanjay Gupta, in his book *Chasing Life*, explains that there are ten times more nerves carrying information from the brain than there are sensory nerves feeding data into the brain. The brain processes the sensory information. If the mind is convinced, perhaps the senses can be ignored. The power of a placebo could be explained by this top-down processing by the brain.



What we experience is influenced by our expectations, and these expectations are important in the healing process since they can trigger neurochemical pathways that result in measurable physiological changes. An expensive medicine tends to be more effective than an inexpensive one. We know that color, shape and size of medication and the newness of a therapy all influence the response of patients. William Osler, frequently referred to as the “father of modern medicine,” once said, “We should use new remedies quickly, while they are still efficacious.”

How important it is that we prayerfully anticipate God's protective care and guidance in our daily lives and live expectantly with the knowledge of his leading.

Harvard researchers have shown that placebos can even work when patients know they are getting them. Patients do respond positively to attentive care shown to them by health practitioners. This interaction also can be considered a treatment, a form of medication.

The brain is capable of making the body feel better. The relationship between “the mind and the body is very intimate.” The mind can energize the whole body and is “one of the most effective agencies for combating disease” (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 241).

Winston J. Craig is a professor of nutrition at Andrews University.